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ABSTRACT

It is common in teacher education programs to require a course in reading or language arts methods, at least for students preparing to be elementary teachers. The question for teachers of methods courses is how they can best prepare students to be teachers of reading. A common approach to teaching a reading methods class is to provide information, such as what a basal reading series is and how many ways there are to decode words. Students are typically concerned about learning pragmatic teaching ideas. However, in a more phenomenological view of reading, the concern is to understand what reading is, what it is that people do when they read, what the experience of reading is, and what difference reading makes in people's lives. Suggestions for fostering this point of view include providing questions for reflection and assigning different types of texts. Phenomenology has also emphasized the importance of stories, and a recognition of their significance can affect not only a reading program but also the way education students plan their programs. Given an understanding about and the beginnings of reflection upon the experience of reading, perhaps preservice teachers will be able to continue observing learning, and reflecting in such a way as to be able to act with insightful wisdom and understanding of their students' experience. (DF)

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TEACHING READING METHODS: HOW DO PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS UNDERSTAND THE EXPERIENCE OF LEARNING TO READ?

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In Harper Lee's novel, To Kill a Mockingbird, Scout graphically describes her very first day in school. Among her various misadventures that day was Miss Caroline's discovery that Scout could already read.

> I suppose she chose me because she knew my name; as I read the alphabet a faint line appeared between her eyebrows, and after making me read most of My First Reader and the stock-market quotations from The Mobile Register aloud, she discovered that I was literate and looked at me with more than faint distaste. Miss Caroline told me to tell my father not to teach me any more, it would interfere with my reading.
>
> (Lee, 1960, p. 21)

Scout protested that her father hadn't taught her, but the teacher waved away that suggestion saying, "Now tell your father not to teach you anymore. It's best to begin reading with a fresh mind. You tell him I'll take over from here and try to undo the damage."

An interesting and amusing comment in view of the emphasis now placed on prior knowledge and on building on what the student already knows. But to Scout the comment was not only inexplicable, but potentially disastrous, as she suddenly realized she could be denied something she had come to take for granted.

> "I never deliberately learned to read... I could not remember when the lines above Atticus's moving finger separated into words, but I had stared at them all the evenings in my memory, listening to the news of the day, Bills To Be Enacted into Laws, the diaries of Lorenzo Dow--anything Atticus happened to be reading when I crawled into his lap every night. Until I feared I would lose it, I never loved to read. One does not love breathing."
>
> (Lee, 1960, p. 22)

Putting aside for the moment the question of what this experience reveals about the classroom and teaching, Scout had found a natural, easy and enjoyable way to learn to read. And she had come to value reading. But such is not always the case. Many children learn to read in school, in the

structured lessons offered by teachers, teachers who are charged by society with the responsibility of making children literate. Society, it has become apparent, puts great stress on this aspect of teaching, as shown by the articles and arguments in popular magazines and on television about the ideal way to teach reading, the reasons for failure, and whether children are poorer readers now than in the past, in addition to the question of teacher accountability--even in a court of law--for a school graduate who is not a fluent reader. This message is not lost on university students in teacher education programs. They want very much to know how to teach children to read and write.

It is common in teacher education programs to require a course in reading (or language arts) methods, at least for students preparing to be elementary teachers. Not all students approach such a course enthusiastically, but generally they acknowledge its importance and so are there fairly willingly. The question, obviously, for those of us who teach these methods courses, is how we can best prepare students to be teachers of reading.

I would like first to sketch two approches to the study of reading: on the one hand the usual approach to teaching reading methods and on the other, the more phenomenological stance toward reading. Following that will be a discussion of possible contributions the insights of reading experience can give to methods teaching.

Methods Courses

First then, the typical approach toward, and concerns of, methods courses. When university students enter their first reading methods course, they are certainly able to read, but usually they have not thought at all about what reading is, or how they themselves do it. They are acutely aware of societal pressure on teachers to make children "good" readers, but they

have only the vaguest idea of what constitutes "good" in reading. Without considering that question, they would like to be told exactly what to do in their classrooms so that the children they teach will all become able readers, and they will be regarded as good teachers. Professors, recognizing the legitimacy of this concern, feel the need to address it.

And there certainly is a body of information to be learned about reading. It is sometimes said that reading is not a discipline, merely a skill used in studying the true subjects disciplines, such as science or art. But discipline or not, it has content which prospective teachers need to know. For example: what is a basal reading series? what are the srengths and weaknesses of basals? what is controlled vocabulary? how many ways are there to decode words? do readers use all of them? how are they learned? what is phonics? and we have not yet touched upon the important and interesting questions of comprehension, critical reading, and integration of reading with the other language arts. While it is easy to dismiss such concerns as mundane and not truly a part of what readers do when they read, they are nevertheless very much a part of the body of knowledge a reading teacher needs.

Further, the students typically are very concerned to learn pragmatic teaching ideas. Since they would like to learn the right way to teach reading, it is sometimes an unpleasant surprise to hear that there is no one right way to teach reading, no one method that will be entirely suitable for all children. And so the temptation for the professor, who knows by hard experience what the students want to hear, is to select one approach, present it as a final answer and flesh it out with endless lists and mini demonstrations of classroom activities. Students usually appreciate hands-on material, activity cards, sources for films and puppets, and lists of ways to drill spelling words. The students' desire for classroom activity suggestions

is both understandable and legitimate. That is the reality they will be facing, and they have thus far had very little experience in creating classroom activities, or translating theory into teaching procedures which logically follow from the theory.

In their attempts to be helpful, professors run the risk of reducing reading to a series of skills and concepts, presenting each in turn with a few instructional strategies, and leaving the impression that reading is a matter of techniques to be mastered. What may be lost entirely in this approach is the realization that reading as a whole is something of an art which is much greater than the sum of its parts, and which in its wholeness can strongly influence the reader's life. Schools have sometimes placed emphasis on "how to read" only.

A Phenomenological View

A more phenomenological view of reading, on the other hand, begins from a very different stance. In phenomenology the concern is to understand what reading is, what it is that we do when we read, what the experience of reading is, and what difference reading makes in our lives. The understanding sought is a pre-theoretic, experientially-based desire to see what it is that makes readers return to texts, seek again and again this experience of being lost in a book. How is it that piles of ink on a page become a human voice that challenges us, inspires us, disgusts us, comforts us? Such a question cannot be answered by a technical description of word identification strategies or comprehension concepts. It must start with what readers say happens to them as they read and uncover the underlying significance of the meeting between reader and text.

And so reading is seen as a dialogue, with the text a voice "that asks to be heard and that requests a response" (Sardello, 1975, p. 275). The text not

only speaks, it listens for a reply. It invites the reader to participate in the search for insight. Since text and reader need each other for the dialogue to be possible, the text is, in that sense, incomplete. Sardello describes all creative works as incomplete. The text presupposes a reader who will establish a dialogue and supply the other half of the conversation. But it is not a matter of filling in blanks, like sticking missing pieces into a jigsaw puzzle or making necessary inferences. The reader helps to shape and guide the flow and direction of the conversation just as a good listener influences and responses to a speaker.

Any dialogue depends upon the contribution of each participant. The nature of each person affects the relationship and hence the conversation between them. In the same way, each reader holds a slightly different dialogue with a text, and it is to be expected that interpretations will vary from one reader to another.

And as with any dialogue, both participants, reader and text, are necessary. "On the stage of the text, no footlights: there is not, behind the text, someone active (the writer) and out front someone passive (the reader); there is not a subject and an object" (Barthes, 1975, p. 16). On stage the play goes on, even though a viewer falls asleep or otherwise ceases to attend. If the whole audience is unresponsive, the performance may be less inspired than usual, but everyone knows that the show must go on. Not so, the reading. There is no adage that it must go on. If the reader ceases to be attentive, it stops immediately. There are no footlights to separate reader and text, simultaneously illuminating and blinding the text. The illumination is the reader's attentiveness and understanding. Without it the stage darkens and there is no play. Dialogue is the light of the reading encounter.

This view of reading as dialogue affects our approach to literary text and literary criticism. "Dialogue, not dissection, opens up the world of a literary work" (Palmer, 1969, p. 7). The distinction between dialogue and dissection is vital. Dissection connotes text as an object to be put on a laboratory table, cut into pieces, microscopically analysed and probed. Dialogue implies an intelligent exchange between living beings, quite a different relationship.

A phenomenological view of reading also encompasses exploration of the new world created by the reading, of the way reality and imagination are experienced in reading, and of how time shifts and flees or stands still. Themes such as intentionality, corporeality, and temporality are fundamental concerns in phenomenology.

Examination of Experience

Reading as typically approached in methods courses and reading as viewed phenomenologically seem, then, to be radically different, virtually two different worlds. It is very easy to hold one stance and be cynical about the other. Merely giving teaching suggestions can be dismissed as an empty "bag of tricks," a "cook book" approach in which prospective teachers are given ways of keeping children busy, but no rationale for these selection and no basis for pedagogical decision-making. By the same token, concern with the nature of the reading experience such as temporality in reading can be regarded as esoteric and useless, telling a teacher nothing about how to turn non-reading six-year-olds into proficient readers. Even the language of the two positions has little in common. Consider the terms: proficiency, competency, skill, strategy, concept, decoding and comprehension; versus: experience, essence, dialogue, reflection, thoughtfulness and understanding.

And if any term is used by both groups, it is certain to have different nuances and connotations in the two contexts.

And so for professors of reading who are dissatisfied with the rather mechanistic and fragmented approach to reading instruction, the question arises of how students' understanding of reading can be enriched. What we cannot do, so if it seems to me, is completely abandon the usual framework. Students, in their student teaching and professional careers, will meet that first set of terminology and need to be familiar with it. So if that view must be taught but is not seen as completely satisfactory, it becomes a matter of how an experiential view of reading can be combined with it to give students a more enlightened vision of what reading is. I am aware that this is a position of compromise which will not please the firm holders of either view, but it seems realistic, perhaps the beginning of change. I would like for the remainder of the paper to begin the exploration of practical ways that a phenomenological approach to reading can contribute to prospective teachers' understanding of the experience of learning to read.

Since the students can all read, a logical starting point is the examination of their own experience as readers. In a typical university class there is a mixture of avid, confident readers and those more reluctant who either doubt their own ability or frankly would rather go skiing than sit and read. But they may well not have thought beyond that about how they, as adults, experience reading. One possibility to help them begin such reflection is to provide a few questions:

1. Do you write in books as you read?
2. When you don't understand what you are reading, what do you do about it?
3. How is re-reading a text a different experience from reading it the first time?

4. When reading a novel, do you ever "read ahead," i.e. read the ending early on?

5. "The reader comes with answers and the text asks questions of the reader." How is this so?

6. In continued reading, how do we know if the text has heard our part of the conversation?

7. Do you think about the text, or respond to it, any differently after finishing the reading than you did during the reading?

8. In what ways is reading solitary? not solitary?

9. When you have finished reading a text, do you want to talk it over with someone? Why or why not?

10. How do you choose when more than one interpretation presents itself?

The purpose of the questions is not to encompass the whole experience for them but to start thinking and discussion. And starting fairly straightforwardly often helps them move on to deeper probing. Small group discussions provide a useful forum both because ideas trigger ideas and because students seem to value--and, to some extent be reassured by--their colleagues' experience. They often express relief when another student "confesses" to a practice they thought was pecularily their own and something to be at least slightly ashamed of. One minor example of this is before beginning an assigned reading checking to see how many pages there are to read and what the conclusion is. This practice seems to strike students as unscholarly and therefore unworthy; that does not keep them from doing it, but they do refrain from broadcasting the fact. Here there is an opportunity for them first to realize that such a practice is very common, also to consider why we so regularly do it, and further to discuss at a deeper level what it shows us about the experience of reading an assigned text.

Gadamer's statement that "the reader comes with answers and the text asks questions of the reader" (1975, p. 307) bears careful examination since it leads toward exploration of the idea that readers do not merely dip into a

text to select a handful of facts like peanuts from a bowl; rather a text if read thoughtfully challenges what we thought we knew, questions our certainty, presents alternatives or elaboration. A certain vulnerability is required of the reader.

The question about reading novel endings ahead of time usually generates an interesting discussion. It seems that in any group of people there are those who do and those who do not and often each feel quite strongly about it. It is necessary, of course, to push students beyond what they do to why and to what the choice reveals. For example, people who reject such reading ahead often consider it "cheating;" some speak of "sneaking ahead for a peek," indicating by those terms an almost ethical force to the decision. Why so? Perhaps because in life we cannot see endings in advance of their occurrence? Or the other hand, there is a certain wholeness of text, a unity, that cannot be known until a reading is finished. Perhaps knowing the ending in advance is an attempt to find that unity early, and to get something of the effect of a re-reading during a first reading.

How many such questions are to be examined and in what depth is determined by the instructor and the thoughtfulness of the students, influenced no doubt by the time constraints of the course. These are meant to serve simply as a few examples of asking students to begin reflecting upon their own reading.

A variation on the same idea is to assign for reading different types of text, such as a journal article, a poem, and a short story, possibly with the first two in common and each student individually choosing the story. Students are to read each text keeping careful notes of their own actions and reactions. (What exactly do I do before starting reading? What parts, if any, are re-read? omitted? How is my thinking influenced? etc.) In talking

with their colleagues, students should then consider what is common across texts and specific to each type, and what is common from one person to another.

Along with reflecting on their own reading, prospective teachers must begin to consider what reading is like for the children being taught. Probably the most extreme case is how it seems to the child entering school faced with this particular task of taking reading lessons. Understanding the experience of another is never an easy matter. And it is not helped in this instance by the fact that teachers have had years of reading practice, so that print shapes itself instantly in our minds as words and ideas. We find it virtually impossible to look at print and not read. We have forgotten a very long time ago what it was like to see letters on a page as a large babble of alien scrawls, meaning nothing. That feeling can be demonstrated in part by such a device as an artificial alphabet which because of its unfamiliarity, once again makes decoding hard work rather than the automatic process it has long since become for experienced readers. Students given minimal practice with a new alphabet and then confronted with a full page of text, often groan aloud at the prospect of being forced to struggle through it. Making the familiar strange can be very illuminating.

While such a strategy may help us break out of our usual mode of thinking, it is obviously not sufficient for truly understanding the child's experience. There is no substitute for observing and listening to children and for listening between the lines to their perceptions. They can be most informative. One bright-eyed six-year-old was asked whether she would rather read a story herself or have an adult read to her. She replied, "I like to read myself, because adults go too fast. I say, 'Read me a story,' and they say, 'I already did.'" For adults who have become impatient with children's

requests for repeated readings, this comment is most enlightening. The reading goes by too quickly. One reading is not enough. What seems apparent to the adult still seems to the child to need reflection. And this child has touched upon one of the real advantages of personal silent reading, namely that the reader controls the pace. Freedom to linger, or hurry, as we choose, to pause and reflect if we wish, makes a distinct difference from listening to oral language in which the speaker sets the pace. Reading may be the only form of dialogue in which we can ask for a repetition any number of times without risk of personal embarrassment or speaker irritation. And as the child who made this comment has apparently realized, opportunity to linger in, live in, a text is a reader's delight.

Another entrance to the child's world is provided by literature. Authors, by whatever mixture of memory, insight and imagination, allow us to see through the eyes of others, and since all authors were once children, revelations of child life abound. We began with the first school day of Scout Finch, a trying experience for her that becomes a reason for reflection by teachers. Scout, probably in common with all students everywhere, had her own opinions of her teacher and that teacher's methods. Scout was a loyal South Alabama child and the new teacher announced that she came from North Alabama, the class "murmured aprehensively" because "North Alabama was full of Liquor Interests, Big Mules, steel companies, Republicans, professors, and other persons of no background" (Lee, 1960, p. 21). But according to Scout's big brother, speaking with the certain knowledge of already being in the fifth grade, Scout's teacher had just learned a new teaching method called the Dewey Decimal System.

"The Dewey Decimal System consisted, in part, of Miss Caroline waving cards at us on which were printed "the," "cat," "rat," "man," and "you." No

comment seemed to be expected of us, and the class received these revelations in silence. I was bored so I began a letter to Dill" (Lee, 1960, p. 23). And, of course, she was caught writing and scolded for it. While such a description is amusing, it is also a reflection of the sorts of conceptions and misconceptions students develop about what their teachers are trying to do. The question of what it is like to be a student in my class is one that teachers need to take seriously.

Reflection upon experience, both our personal experience and that of others we know or find in literature, is of utmost importance.

Discovering Story

Experience seems to lead naturally into telling about it, into story. One of the contributions phenomenology has made is to emphasize the importance of the story. In some sense the method of phenomenology is simply to tell the story, let the story itself speak. Is there anyone who does not enjoy stories? From infancy onward we are steeped in stories and endlessly fascinated by them: fairy tales, family events, myths, daily anecdotes, legends, jokes, classics, romance, fables, mysteries, biographies, westerns, dramas, sports accounts, family history, examples, adventures. . . and all sorts of mixtures.

What is the attraction of stories? What do we experience with them that gives us such an insatiable appetite for more? It seems that every human society that ever existed has had its stories; even though they differ greatly in structure and content and may be oral or written, they are still stories that are widely enjoyed. Stories typically deal with human personality or personifications in action with others or with the environment. And people are forever interested in people and what happens to them. From the most superficial gossip and people-watching to the most profound insights into the

human heart, we are, each of us, very much "involved in mankind." And we will turn again and again for another look at the beings we and our neighbours are.

Also stories not cnly allow, but encourage, multiple responses. A story is written on several levels and a reader can respond on any of them. All sorts of factors in the reader--age, personal background, current interests, maturity, personality--will determine the level at which the reader is capable of understanding. And these change over time, so that in re-reading a story, we often respond differently than we did initially. But the same variation in response is available for different readers.

Another fascination of stories is that they are not <u>about</u> life, but rather they plunge us directly into it. <u>The Chosen</u> is not a sociological analysis of how Jewish boys are educated in New York City, nor a treatise on the variables involved in selecting a profession; rather it lets us live with Reuven and Danny, share their friendship and their education and join in their choices. The story is two boys living their way into manhood, not an analysis of the issues involved in maturation. The experience itself is there, not processed through an analytical filter.

All the experiences of life are found in stories, but vicariously and safely. They give us life in a microcosm, reduced to manageable proportions, but with a satisfying completeness and complexity.

Each human society seems to have its great stories, its myths and legends, which are the heart of the culture, which are told and retold, thus retaining and communicating the truths and values that matter. The stories are at once entertainment and teaching, the passing on of a heritage in a form that people are eager to drink in. The young are enthralled by the newness and intrigue of the tale; the old are at ease with a return to the loved and familiar. For good stories bear repeating.

Why all this emphasis on stories? A recognition of their significance will very much affect a reading program and how we advise our students to plan theirs. First and perhaps most obviously, it will involve very extensive use of children's literature. The basal readers with their contrived language and constrained vocabulary will give way to the wealth of well-written and evocative children's stories. This emphasis on story not only gives support to those who have been criticizing the basals, but goes further to argue that a story with impact, meaning and quality is not merely preferable, but essential. For us at the university that means that not only will we seek to show the impact and importance of stories, but we will need to find ways of extending our students' familiarity with children's books. They cannot use in their teaching what they do not know. So it may be that an important part of our courses will involve the wide reading of this literature, along with a growing critical judgment and aesthetic appreciation. Students need also to be shown how they can plan and run a school reading program based on this literature.

A second effect of emphasis on story and literature will be to examine how stories are interpreted and why variations in interpretation are entirely to be expected. If reading is seen as a dialogue between reader and text, then it is surely logical that each reader, being a different person, holds a somewhat different dialogue with the text. Each reader brings individual experience and understanding to the story and takes away what seems significant. If different children value and treasure in the story something different than that which appeals to the teacher, so be it. This is a breaking away from the concept of the single right answer, with every child expected to find it. In text interpretation, if everybody in the class reaches exactly the same conclusion, it is usually the teacher's. Certainly

misinterpretations are both possible and common, and teachers need to learn to distinguish between misinterpretations in which misreading has occurred and a legitimate range of acceptable interpretations. This requires some sensitivity and judgment from the teacher, since we all have a natural tendency to think that our own view must be the correct one.

A third effect of the realization of how stories influence us will be to see that what is read is of considerable significance. One result of the traditional emphasis in school on how to read (i.e. on acquiring skills) has sometimes been the view that it does not matter what children read, as long as they do read. Anything is better than nothing. If stories are seen as a source that nourishes our inner life, helps create our vision of the world and influences the values and ideals we hold, then surely the quality is of the essence. Saying that it does not matter what children read as long as they read seems about as sensible as saying it does not matter what they eat as long as they eat. If prospective teachers are to help children select books and discuss them with such criteria in mind, we in our methods courses are going to have to help them become much more sensitive and able at literary and aesthetic judgments than they now seem to be.

A final potential effect of phenomenology on reading study I would like merely to raise is that it could become a basis for a critique of the ways reading has typically been studied. The study of reading has often been from quite a cognitivist position with emphasis on being able to graph the process. One current example is schema theory which attempts to lay out how text is structured, how information is structured in the mind, and how the appropriate structures are activated during the reading process. A phenomenological perspective might suggest that such an approach to describing the relationship between reader and text could equally well describe the relationship between

two inanimate objects. The dialogue, the power not only to convey ideas but to trigger them, the involvement that makes us laugh or weep as we read, all seem missing. In short, a very special human endeavour has lost its humanness. This possibility of a radical critique seems a subject for another paper, so I only mention it here as a matter for further thought.

Northrop Frye once told an interviewer: "All methods of criticism and teaching are bad if they encourage the persisting separation of student and literary work; all methods are good if they try to overcome it" (Dillon, 1980, p. 205). Phenomenology with its emphasis on the human dimensions: the person, the experience, the story, strives for exactly that.

To return then, in conclusion, to the question of the title: how do pre-service teachers understand the experience of learning to read? They probably basically do not understand it--not unless their methods course is presented in such a way as to help them realize both the importance of such an understanding and the beginnings of reflection upon the experience of reading. Given such a foundation, our hope would be that they will be able to continue observing, learning and reflecting in such a way as to be able to act with insightful pedagogic wisdom and with genuine understanding of their students' experience.

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